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# The True Cost: The Bitter Truth behind Fast Fashion

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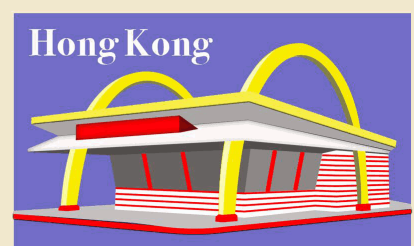
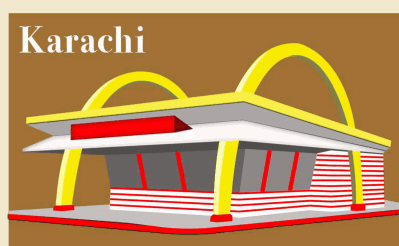
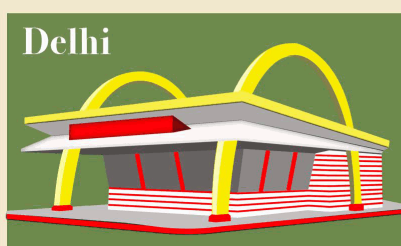
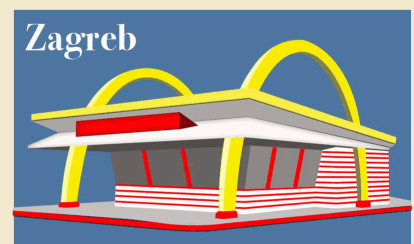
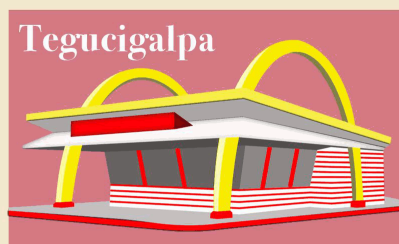
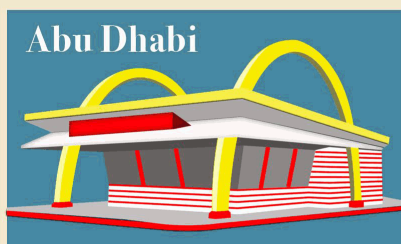
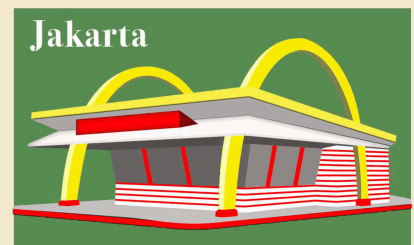
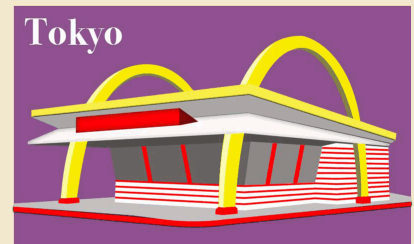
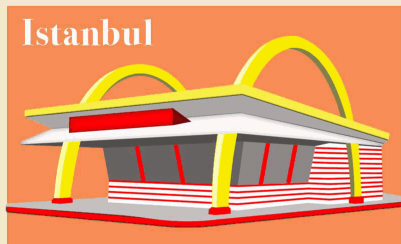
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# Markets, Globalization & Development Review



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# The True Cost: The Bitter Truth behind Fast Fashion

Zeynep Ozdamar-Ertekin

## Abstract

The True Cost is a documentary about the clothes we wear, the people who make them and the impact the industry has on the environment, the society, and the workers. It shows us the dark and grim side of global fast fashion supply chain. The review provides the main highlights of the film and summarizes the human, social and environmental costs of the industry. A number of counter-examples are included to show how people can make a difference and there can be a better way of making clothes. The current fast fashion model is all about profit. It does not take into consideration what the true cost is. It is imperative that we start to question, challenge and consider the long term sustainability of this model. In this regard, The True Cost can be a turning point for most of the viewers, inviting consumers, producers, and governments to become more sensitive on these issues.

## Keywords

True Cost, Fashion, Clothing, Environment, Workers

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## ***Film Review***

# **Andrew Morgan, *The True Cost* (2015): The Bitter Truth behind Fast Fashion**

*The True Cost* by Andrew Morgan is a documentary film about the clothes we wear, the people who make them, and the impact the industry has on our world, the environment, the society, and the workers. Unlike most of the fashion films that we have become accustomed to, *The True Cost* is not about the glamour, fabulousness, and excitement of the fashion industry. Instead, it shows us the dark and grim side of global fast fashion supply chain. It is a story about greed and fear, power and poverty, examining connections between fashion, consumerism, mass media, globalization and capitalism (Siegle 2015). The documentary was premiered at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival on May 15 and released on May 29, 2015. The director and screenwriter Andrew Morgan decided to make *The True Cost* after the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 (Siegle 2015). Discovering the industry's human rights violations and environmental impacts, encouraged him to make the film. The producer and editor is Michael Ross and the executive producers are Lucy Siegle, Livia Firth, Vincent Vittorio, and Christopher L. Harvey.

Morgan traveled thirteen countries in two years to collect information and conducted interviews with different actors and influencers of the fashion industry, including environmentalists, garment workers, factory owners, and people supporting fair trade companies and promoting sustainable clothing production (Morgan 2015). Among the participants are Lucy Siegle (journalist, broadcaster and author based in UK), Stella McCartney (fashion designer and animal-rights activist), Livia Firth (creative director of the sustainability brand consultancy Eco-Age), Safia Minney (founder of fair trade clothing company People Tree), Orsola De Castro (fashion designer) and Larhea Pepper (organic cotton farmer). Some of the other individuals featured in the film include, economist Richard D. Wolff, John Hilary of the charity War on Want, and environmentalist Vandana Shiva. The film also shows people with opposing views who defend the low-cost prices such as Benjamin Powell, director of the Free Market Institute at Texas Tech University and Kate Ball-Young, former sourcing manager of fashion brand Joe Fresh.

The fashion industry today is different than before. Morgan highlights that global fashion brands are now part of an almost 3 trillion dollar industry and are continuing to increase their profits by outsourcing production to low cost economies, particularly where the wages are very

low, such as Bangladesh, India and Cambodia. The more products are outsourced, the cheaper the prices have become, transforming the way the clothing is bought and sold today. Similarly, John Hilary explains that those at the top of the value chain choose where the products are being made, and they get to switch if another producer makes it at a lower price to minimize costs and maximize profits. On the other hand, whilst the price of clothing has been decreasing, the human and environmental costs have been increasing. Consequently, the current fast fashion system based on speed, disposability and price deflation has led to the worst casualties in recent years (Cavusoglu and Dakhli 2016; Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik 2015; Ozdamar-Ertekin 2016; Siegle 2015). The documentary details these devastating human, social, and environmental costs.

### ***Human Cost***

Garment workers are among the lowest paid in the world, some earning only few dollars a day. They are subject to hazardous working conditions that resulted in such tragedies as the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, having 1,129 employees killed and many more injured in the collapse of a factory building that had already been pointed out as unsafe and yet the workers were forced back in. According to Morgan, the Rana Plaza tragedy brought into light the global inequities behind cheap clothing and was a call to action.

Most of these workers have no voice in the larger supply chain and face difficulties demanding their rights. Shima, a Bangladeshi garment worker in Dhaka is only one of the examples, who states that they were beaten up by their managers for demanding better working conditions. Similarly, the film shows Cambodian garment workers being shot, injured, or arrested by police during protests for minimum wage increase. Morgan explains that Cambodian government, like other developing nations, is desperate for business. Therefore, in order to reduce international retailers' chance of relocating the production to other low cost countries, the government holds down wages and avoids enforcement of local labor laws. As the Director of Institute for Labor Rights Barbara Briggs states, most of these big companies have their code of conduct, which claims that they take responsibility for all the conditions under which their products are made. However, none of them want to support a law which defends decent working conditions and fair competition. Instead, they want to keep the voluntary codes of conduct because as the major brands do not employ the workers or own any of the factories, they remain free of responsibility of the effects of low wages, factory disasters, and violent treatment of workers.

*The True Cost* sheds light on this high level of inequality and addresses the fact that we are increasingly disconnected from the people who make our clothes. However, the human cost of the garment industry is too big to ignore. In the documentary, John Hilary, Lucy Siegle and Livia Firth all address this problem and criticize the big corporations for exploiting cheap labor and violating workers' rights and safety in order to make enormous profits. The most common justification for this cost is the economic benefits generated (Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik 2015). Low wages, unsafe working conditions, and factory disasters are all excuse for the needed jobs that they create for people with no alternatives. For instance, Ball-Young, former sourcing manager of a fashion brand, argues that in comparison to more unsafe alternatives, the fashion industry is a good choice for workers as there are worse things that they could be doing. Similarly, Powell, the director of the Free Market Institute, claims that sweatshops are places that people choose to work from a bad set of other options. "They are part of the process that raises living standards and leads to better working conditions and development over time." However, in the end, it leads to mass impoverishment of hundreds of people all around the world and as Firth states, the only ones getting richer are the owners of the big corporations and fast fashion brands.

### ***Social cost***

Along with the production side of the fashion industry, the film also looks at the consumption side. Historically, clothing has been something we used for a long time, but with availability and accessibility of cheap clothing, it has become disposable (Ozdamar-Ertekin and Atik 2015). As Siegle states, fast fashion has created such a system that instead of the traditional two seasons a year model, we now have around 52 seasons a year, which means the stores have something new coming in every week. Consequently, the world now consumes about 80 billion new pieces of clothing every year. This is 400% more than the amount we used to consume in the 1990s (Morgan 2015). The way we buy clothes has changed so much and so fast that we have to start considering the consequences of such an increase in consumption.

Along with the increasing speed of consumption, the amount of clothes and textiles being discarded has been increasing over the last 10 years as well (Christina Dean, Founder and CEO of Redress; Ozdamar-Ertekin 2016). Morgan addresses that the average American now generates 82 pounds (37 kg) of textile waste each year, adding up to more than 11 million tons of textile waste from US alone. Furthermore, as the ethical fashion designer Orsela de Castro states, people may think that they are offsetting the amount of cheap clothing by donating to charities.



However, only 10% percent of the donated clothes get recycled or up-cycled or go to thrift shops; the rest go to landfills. Most of this waste is non biodegradable, which means that they sit in landfills for 200 years or more, releasing harmful gasses into the atmosphere. Furthermore, the charities cannot sell most of the donated clothes in their local thrift stores, so they ship them to third world countries. Consequently, as we go through our clothing faster and faster, more of it is being dumped into developing countries like Haiti, weakening their local clothing industries and polluting the land and water.

The argument behind the need for governments and corporations to have consumption at such high levels is that, the economic system, especially in Western countries, is based on consumer capitalism and materialism. However, Tim Kasser, Psychology Professor at Knox College, states that the more the people are focused on materialistic values, the less happy, the more depressed, and the more anxious they become. These findings conflict with the messages that we receive from advertisements, suggesting that materialism and pursuit of possessions is what is going to make us happy and solve our problems.

### ***Environmental Cost***

The film also illustrates the environmental damage resulting from the industry's massive growth. Morgan addresses that the garment industry is the second-most-polluting industry in the world, after oil industry. Moreover, it is using a huge amount of natural resources. Similarly, Mike Schragger, founder of the Sustainable Fashion Academy, points out that a lot of the resources we use to make our clothing are not accounted for in the cost of producing those clothes. On the other hand, as John Hilary states, the capital does not have limits on its expansion and growth whereas the natural environment has defined limits to how much the world can sustain and we already overstepped those limits.

Cotton represents nearly half of the total fiber used to make clothing today. As consumption of clothing increases, the cotton plant is reengineered to keep up with this speed. Larhea Pepper, an organic cotton farmer in Texas, underlines that in the past 10 years more than 80% of the cotton has become genetically modified, using vast amounts of water as well as chemicals such as pesticides and insecticides. These chemicals have impacts both on the land and human health. Moreover, people do not get that direct connection with clothing as they do with organic food. However, the skin is the largest organ on the body and these chemicals are passed into the bloodstream of the people wearing these clothes. Therefore, we have to start looking at the problem from a broader perspective.

The film furthermore shows that the planting of the genetically modified cotton and the monopoly in its use by seed companies, leads to suicides among farmers who lose their land to these companies since they cannot pay the seed prices. Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist in India, explains this process in the documentary. The more we use chemicals such as fertilizers or pesticides, the more we need to use them because we have contaminated the soil. In the end, the farmers get into deeper depth as they cannot afford the high cost of these seeds and chemicals, since they have to keep buying more. Some end up losing their lands and committing suicides. Morgan states that in the last 16 years there have been more than 250000 recorded farmer suicides in India.

Most of India's cotton is grown in the region Punjab, which has become the largest user of pesticides in India. Dr. Pritpal Singh, who has been studying the effects of these chemicals, fertilizers, and pesticides on human health, reports dramatic rise in the number of birth defects, cancers, physical and mental disabilities in the region. Similarly, in cotton fields in Texas, pesticide and chemical use is associated to high number of brain tumors. Leather production is also linked to a variety of environmental and human health hazards. Workers are exposed to harmful chemicals on the job while the waste generated pollutes natural water sources leading to increased diseases in the surrounding areas, such as the Ganges River and Kanpur in India. With growing demands for cheap leather, major western brands source cheap materials avoiding accountability for the growing cost of human health and environment.

### ***Discussion: How to Make a Difference?***

The film does not only show the destructive ways in which the industry operates. Morgan also included a number of counter-examples of how people can make a difference (Morgan 2015). As awareness of fashion's impact on our world is growing, there are leaders and initiators who are questioning the impacts of a model built on careless production and endless consumption and who believe that there must be a better way of making clothes.

Patagonia is one of these examples. Rick Ridgeway, Vice President of Environmental Affairs at Patagonia, argues that without a reduction in consumption, the health of the planet will continue to decline. Therefore, they want customers who understand that true happiness is not necessarily achieved by owning more stuff and who recognize the impact of their consumption. Similarly, fashion designer Stella McCartney, underlines that fashion industry needs to question and challenge the way it operates in a way that is not harmful to the planet. One of the executive producers of the film, Livia Firth, who runs a sustainable consultancy firm



called Eco Age, is also calling for major change in the fashion industry. She started the Green Carpet Challenge, urging celebrities and top designers to take part in more mindful forms of fashion and works to make sustainable fashion more widespread.

Another example featured in the documentary is the fair trade and sustainable fashion label People Tree, founded by Safia Minney over 20 years ago in Japan. People Tree operates based on fair-trade standards, where producers get a fair share of the profits. Minney argues that full transparency and accountability is required for consumers to know that the products they buy support the people and the environment in a responsible way (Minney 2014). Unlike some, Minney is not pessimistic about the future. She believes that there will be a significant amount of change over the next 10 years and as People Tree they want to be a catalyst of change within the industry, showing that the model works.

John Hilary, the Executive Director of War on Want, an organization committed to fighting global poverty, argues that we must find a way to continue to operate in a globalized world that also values people and the planet. Similarly, economist Richard Wolff and the author of *Stitched Up* Tansy Hoskins are convinced that the real problem is within the system itself, which only aims to create more profit and eventually produces inequalities and tension. Therefore, we have to think for alternative systems that might work better. In order to change or improve the system, customers have a role to play as well. Both Siegle and Firth address that it is important to think about the origins of our clothes and to make a connection with the makers of the garments we buy and wear, as well as to inform brands that we care about these people.

Some of the critiques argue that the only solution the film offers is to redesign the fashion industry and the global capitalist system that supports it. It does not provide what the new system will look like and how we can move toward it (i.e., Scherstuhl 2015). Furthermore, it is unlikely to affect the buying habits of millions of consumers who have become addicted to low clothing prices (i.e., Scheck 2015). Moreover, fashion critic Vanessa Friedman said it oversimplifies some aspects of the industry. In trying to address everything, Morgan overlooked many gray areas (Friedman 2015).

Both Siegle and Morgan's response to these critiques was that the film does not give viewers a clear answer on how to solve the problems because there are no straightforward answers. Instead, Morgan encourages people to feel and think deeply about the issues raised (Siegle 2015). His main hope for the film was that it would spark a debate on the topic and make people more mindful of their choices (Blanchard

2015). In this regard, the documentary has been successful in encouraging the viewers to question the current fast fashion industry; increasing consciousness of the consumers; and inviting producers and governments to become more sensitive on these issues.

The current fast fashion model is all about profit. It does not take into consideration what the true cost is. Therefore, it is imperative that we start to question and consider the long term sustainability of this model. *The True Cost* can be a turning point for most of the viewers to start considering the story behind the clothes we wear. As Morgan states in his concluding remarks "*together we begin to make a real change as we remember that everything we wear was touched by human hands. In the myths of all the challenges facing us today and all the problems that feel bigger than us and beyond our control maybe we can start here with clothing.*"

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